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Probe N.J. man in spy plot

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Federal authorities are investigating charges that a New Jersey soldier of fortune, who once robbed a bank reportedly to finance a pro-Nazi group, masterminded a plot that freed a Soviet spy from prison.

Frank Abbott Sweeney, 38, described as a former Rhodesian mercenary and avowed Nazi supporter, was released on \$250,000 personal recognizance bond yesterday after he was arrested Thursday at his home in Closter, N.J., on charges of illegal possession of a .38-caliber revolver and a 9-mm. automatic handgun.

Prosecutors asked U.S. Magistrate Serena Peretti in Newark to order Sweeney held on \$250,000 bail pending complete investigation of the jailbreak that freed the spy last year.

A source close to the investigation told the

Daily News that Sweeney may have helped convicted spy Christopher John Boyce escape from a federal prison in Lompoc, Calif., in January 1980.

Boyce was serving 40 years for stealing and selling to the Soviet Union "highly sensitive" data about U.S. satellite operations. The source said Boyce was given phony documents to get out of the country and may be hiding in Africa.

AUTHORITIES SAID Sweeney met Boyce while the two were in a California federal jail. Sweeney was serving four years for mail fraud, and Boyce was awaiting trial on the espionage charges.

The source said that U.S. marshals secretly installed a homing beacon on Sweeney's car to trace him to an abandoned apartment in California, where they found a letter from Sweeney that referred to "our escaped friend."

Federal agents in Newark then made the gun-charge arrest to get him into custody.

"We were drawn to his attention because the U.S. marshals were interested in him for the other reasons," one federal prosecutor said. "He's a convicted felon and he's not entitled to have such weapons."

Authorities said the baby-faced Sweeney enlisted in the Rhodesian army in 1973, shortly after serving 6½ years in jail for shooting a New Jersey policeman in a 1967 bank robbery in Tenafly.

In 1962, when he was 19, he was convicted of robbing an Englewood, N.J., bank with a toy gun in what police said was an attempt to finance a small fringe group of pro-Nazis. He served two years in jail.

In 1976, he was sentenced to four years in jail on mail fraud charges for offering to sell German-made automatic handguns. As part of the scheme, Sweeney used the name Francis August Schellhammer and posed as a collector of submachine pistols.